Medical enhancement and luxury: some ethical considerations regarding two recent events in Geneva

Roduit, Johann A R

Viewpoint

Medical enhancement and luxury: some ethical considerations regarding two recent events in Geneva

Johann Roduit[a]

a Institute of Biomedical Ethics, University of Zurich

A Botox party in Geneva and a Summer Academy at the Brocher Foundation may seem to be two unrelated events. The «Botox party» was organised by the events management company Camberwell B at the Kempinski Hotel in Geneva at the end of July 2011 [1]. For 130 Swiss francs you could participate in the event and enjoy champagne, appetisers, a dinner and a dance. The practice is popular in the United Kingdom and the United States, so if they do it, why shouldn't we? For a Botox injection, supervised by a renowned doctor in Geneva who wished to stay anonymous, the price went up to 570 Swiss francs [2]. The other event was an interdisciplinary Summer Academy organised at the beginning of July by the Brocher Foundation in collaboration with the Hastings Center to discuss issues of human enhancement, with fourteen renowned international professors and about forty participants from different countries and disciplines such as law, philosophy, and bioethics. No doubt, these two events did not appeal to the same public and the participants had very different conversations. However, implicit in the attendance of those at the Botox Party were the important ethical questions discussed at the Brocher Foundation meeting. Two different social worlds separated by only a few weeks in Geneva, joined in one conversation that includes questions such as: What are the goals of medicine? Who defines these goals? Are there limits on shaping our body and mind? Who sets these limits and why? Is it morally permissible to use medical resources for purposes other than therapy? Should we use these resources for someone healthy while others lack access to basic healthcare?

In the following I revisit three key elements presented at this Summer Academy and will apply them to the practice of Botox partying. First, I will argue that the ethics of human enhancement need not be polarised between two camps. Second, people in the field need to be reminded of the larger context in which the debate takes place. Third, both proponents and opponents of enhancement should realise that some of their frameworks have emotional, pre-rational, and faith-like elements that need to be exposed for consideration. Finally, I suggest that in our liberal Swiss society one is of course free to have Botox parties, but that *both* proponents and opponents of such parties should develop virtues such as solidarity and acceptance.

In the last few years, the debate about the ethics of human enhancement has become a battlefield, polarised between the proponents and opponents of enhancing technologies. These two opposing camps have lobbed arguments at each other and turned the middle into a wasteland, burying more moderate voices and positions. These voices who are trying to find an Aristotelian means between two extremes need also to be heard. Unfortunately, a lot of hype in this debate tends to give greater public voice to the extremes. To get the attention of the popular media, it is sexier to argue about living forever, transforming ourselves into cyborgs, and uploading our minds to machines than to try to defend a more skeptical view concerning enhancement. The Summer Academy was a reminder that a lot of excellent scholars such as John Hoberman, Steve Hall, Illina Singh, David Wasserman, Michael McNamee (to name a few) try to avoid these extremes. As

Eric Juengst jokingly pointed out, such experts may just be confused or uncommitted [3]. However, it is more reasonable to say that they are on to something: when it comes to new technology aiming to improve, restore or change the human condition, we need to be aware of the context of each one. It is naïve to either embrace all technologies or deny the benefit of all. Each will need careful ethical analysis. In the same way, when we speak of enhancement, we will not find an overall ethic applicable to each case, but we will need to evaluate each one in terms of its context. Enhancement in sport or military, cognitive enhancement, aesthetic enhancement, genetic enhancement and moral enhancement bring about different discussions.

Second, researchers working on enhancement also need to be reminded of their larger context, which includes other ethical problems that are often more important. Again, while talking about living forever, mind uploading, and posthumanism is fascinating, it is important to distinguish fiction from fact, and hype from real possibilities. Tom Shakespeare of the WHO reminded the audience that people with disabilities need access to health, not super health [4]. Shakespeare makes a distinction between therapy and enhancement that not everyone will agree with, but he is quite right that it is tragic so many worry about the possibilities of extending their life forever, while others do not have access to minimum health care. Moreover, discussions about enhancement are luxuries of countries that already have plenty, while other countries still need clean water, a basic standard of life. I am not arguing that we should avoid discussing human enhancement (I am writing my dissertation on the topic!), but that people working in this area need to remember larger priorities.

Third, proponents and opponents need a civilised debate. There is no need to belittle those with whom we disagree. Of course, bad arguments need to be criticised but those giving the arguments do not deserve the same treatment. Many attacks have been made on bioconservatives for their supposedly «religious» arguments. For example, Michael Sandel has argued that life is a gift [5]. He has since been accused of bringing a religious argument into a secular debate. However, two clarifications are needed here. First, recognising life as a gift does not entail the assumption that we can know the giver, or that there is one [6]. Some will affirm that we can, and others will disagree. Second, transhumanists also use highly religious language. To speak of omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience and immortality as possibilities elicits a vision of becoming or creating some kind of divinity. This new religion will not be similar to those we know, but it draws heavily on historically religious elements.

As for Botox parties, I suspect that people from different religious backgrounds, or none, can still advance arguments for and against them. First, in doing so, it will be helpful not to demean their opponents, but to try to understand their framework. Second, it will be useful to be reminded that people raising their voice for or against such parties may often have pre-rational or faith-like arguments or emotions that dictate their position. Third, these issues and practices can arise only in an abundant society. While it is essential to address our problems, it is also important to remember the context in which we live. Some people have limited access to health care or struggle with their monthly expenses, which is a more important problem than a select few having access to super healthcare. Of course, in a liberal society we do not want to impose our vision of the good life on others or prohibit them from using their freedom to consume luxury medicine. However, it is always good to remember that our neighbours may need us to be a Good Samaritan and provide them with basic health care. Moreover, as Shakespeare reiterated to his audience at the Brocher Foundation event: it may be better to add life to our days than days to our lives [7]. If the practice does no harm to anyone, there is no *a priori* reason to ban these Botox parties or other efforts to improve ourselves beyond therapy. But we need to be reminded that *acceptance* of ourselves and others and *solidarity* with those unable to afford or unwilling to participate in this endeavour are important virtues in a society often quite individualistic, selfish and insecure. I hope that these three points shared during the Summer Academy would also help us think through other moral difficulties as we face more and more new technologies to alter ourselves.

Correspondence
Johann A. R. Roduit
Institute of Biomedical Ethics
University of Zurich
Pestalozzistrasse 24
CH-8032 Zurich

E-mail: Johann.roduit[at]ethik.uzh.ch

References

1. Citroni F. Une soirée Botox, ça vous fait rêver ou ça vous effraie? Le Matin. 2011 July 8. Available from: www.lematin.ch/actu/suisse/une-soiree-botox-ca-vous-fait-rever-ou-ca-vous-effraie [cited 24.11.2011].
2. Camberwell B. Events Management. Available from: http://camberwellb.com/botox%20ang.htm. [cited 24.11.2011].
3. Juengst E. Round Table. Brocher-Hastings Summer Academy on Human Enhancement: Medical, Ethical and Legal Implications. Geneva. July 8, 2011.
4. Shakespeare T. Disabilities rights perspectives on the ‹enhancement› debate. Brocher-Hastings Summer Academy on Human Enhancement: Medical, Ethical and Legal Implications. Geneva. July 5, 2011.
5. Sandel M. The Case Against Perfection. Cambridge: Belknap Press; 2007.
6. Parens E. Toward a More Productive Conversation about Technologically Enhancing Humans. Brocher-Hastings Summer Academy on Human Enhancement: Medical, Ethical and Legal Implications. Geneva. July 4, 2011.
7. Shakespeare T. Disabilities rights perspectives on the ‹enhancement› debate. Brocher-Hastings Summer Academy on Human Enhancement: Medical, Ethical and Legal Implications. Geneva. July 5, 2011.